

A Ride Through the new age of Librarianship: Various Questions and Only a few Answers.

Experiences from the BOBCATSSS 2008 Symposium in Zadar

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Abstract

Since BOBCATSSS-Symposia usually have an open minded atmosphere, they present a very good opportunity for an open and undogmatic discussion about the challenges of librarianship and information science. This article deals with experiences I made when I visited several workshops and panels dealing with the topics "Information Literacy in the Digital Age" and "Web 2.0 Applications for Libraries". In my personal view the participants are still in the stadium of getting aware of the challenges arising from these topics. Secondly, I want to depict the openness of the "BOBCATSSS Discourse Style" that I experienced while I was listening to the discussions.

BOBCATSSS, an annually organised symposium, always indicates new and undogmatic trends and challenges for information science and librarianship.

BOBCATSSS 2008 was my first conference on these subjects and as a member of one of the organising institutions I was involved in different activities and had different roles to play, as an organizer, as a moderator and of course as a visitor. Finally, I was involved as a critical reporter from the public relations group cooperating with the LIBREAS team. Now I have the possibility to give an insider report dealing with the content, topics and the subject of the symposium "Access to Information for Everyone". So what is going on in the young community of librarians and information professionals?

From the point of view of Claudia Lux (the second keynote speaker) librarians and libraries have to become more visible. Thus I want to show topics librarians were occupied with at the symposium. Taking into account that some panels, lectures and workshops I participated in dealt with a kind of awareness training concerning new digital tasks for librarians, I felt there was some fear that librarians would become old fashioned. To exemplify this, I want to demonstrate these fears with regard to the following events:

Information literacy strategies in the digital age

Maggie Fieldhouse from the University College in London (UCL) presented a very interesting workshop. She focussed on lots of problems librarians have to face nowadays concerning information literacy. She was involved in a research project about this topic at the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research at the UCL. In the age of search engines information behaviour is changing. But do we really know how search engines work? We need to! Chaotic information seeking behaviour is contradictive to the systematic approach librarians have.

Another topic of the workshop was the "copy and paste phenomenon". The problems of using these techniques are the "loose of contextual meaning, plagiarism and misuse of others' intellectual property"¹. Especially undergraduates are not aware of these consequences. So what possibilities are there to teach pupils information literacy in the digital age? Another point with regard to information literacy in the education debate is: Which information is good enough to cite? Is there anybody who wants to take responsibility to decide that?

Beside the topic of "Information Literacy in Education" another workshop group dealt with the subject "Digital Literacy – the Net Generation". This group concluded that young people very often know better than old people how to work with so called Web 2.0 technologies even if the old people were librarians or university teachers of information science. This means the other way around: lecturers have to become pupils again if they want to stay in touch with the information seeking and information creating behaviour of the ne(x)t generation. This also includes use of blogs, wikis and other Web 2.0 applications.

¹ Fieldhouse, Maggie (2008) BOBCATSSS workshop: 28th January 2008. Information literacy strategies in the digital age – new paradigms of information seeking behaviour. (workshop material)

Panel Web 2.0 / Web 3.0

A similar disorientation as in the “Digital Literacy” workshop could be seen at the Web 2.0 / Web 3.0 panel. Librarians have to raise the awareness of Web 2.0 technologies and especially how these technologies could be implemented in libraries. Librarians have to develop a professional attitude and methods to evaluate the utility of Web 2.0 software for their institutions and their customers.

Another important point for the status of library science is challenging authorities by using weblogs. Blogs, this was the opinion of a panel participant, give power to the masses. Is that problematic for the knowledge authority of librarians? Librarians might be afraid that in the future the customer will index the collection himself. How librarians will handle that, especially the idea of sharing information, is not to be foreseen. Is it about time now for libraries to share their authority files with the public? What about social tagging? Should this method be a way of complementing the library indexing? Tom Roos (speaker) gave the ultimate forecast for the development of the Web 2.0 topic (paraphrase):

It is a new phenomenon. We do not know anything about the future developments. We do not know anything about the tendencies, challenges and about the question who will teach these technologies. We have to find out which tools work adequately. We have to get aware of what kind of contact users are interested in. Just experience what is out there and test it!

“Everyone’s a Librarian Now”² was a workshop from Mark Clowes and Matthew Borg of the Sheffield Hallam University dealing with the Web 2.0 topic and its impacts for librarians in a more concrete way. What would you as a reference librarian answer if a person tells you: “I don’t tend to use the reference books because I can find answers on Google” or “I don’t use the library because I get emailed relevant articles from my friends.”³. You really have to be up to date and well prepared to answer to such statements. It is necessary for librarians to be familiar with social software (i.e. Web 2.0 applications) in order to make clear to potential customers that the library is still important for them.

The three different groups of this workshop discussed what kind of social software they would use e.g. for the selection of media. They faced questions like:

- “What skills or expertise does the librarian bring to the use of these tools?”
- What issues may arise in implementing them?
- What will happen if librarians do not engage with them?”⁴

In the further fruitful discussion some theoretical consequences and statements were given. Libraries will become old fashioned if they do not adapt or at least know how to use Web 2.0 technologies. Another statement was that libraries have to be reliable and trustworthy. Librarians have to fight for their right to be responsible for knowledge creation and dissemination. The workshop concluded with the thesis: it is very important to develop a Web 2.0 model for the services of libraries.

What’s next?

There is a generation gap in the world of information professionals. How can we insist on the name information professional if we do not know how undergraduates work with information?

Nowadays librarianship is on the one hand situated between the responsibility to deal with information adequately, which also includes some kind of authority, and on the other hand its necessity to open itself for a discussion about integrating the public, sharing information, giving users outside the library the right of expertise in information authority as well. The function of the librarians needs to change. Their main tasks will have to be to adjust open information flows and bring them together under one interface to become useful and reliable information. ‘Access to information for everyone’ intends that everyone should be able to decide about the relevance of information. Consequently, everyone who accesses information should have the ability to create and publish that information.

² <http://ealn.blogspot.com/>

³ Clowes, Mark & Borg, Matthew (2008) Everyone’s a librarian now. BOBCATSSS workshop 30th January 2008. The role of the information professional in the Web 2.0 era. (workshop material)

⁴ Clowes & Borg, 2008

Even though everything concerning the challenges of librarians in future is fluid, there is one thing that is for sure: The roles of librarians between service providers, gatekeepers or knowledge navigators are getting more and more complex everyday. Librarians still maintain to be the only knowledge navigators or gatekeepers of quality. But this is a fallacy. Librarians have to be prepared that in a not so far away day they will have to compete against potentially everyone with regard to information management.

These topics forecast new realities for the discipline of librarianship. To face the problems and raise awareness to stay on top with future developments is a useful starting point. Maybe in the future the only difference between the librarian and everyone is that the librarian will have the duty to keep the discourse on information management going. In discussing the challenges of the digital age one point at the BOBCATSSS 2008 symposium became significant: As long as there are lively discussions about library trends librarians are neither old fashioned nor dinosaurs in the information society. Hopefully, the answers and agendas for action will follow.

The proceedings are available online: Petra Hauke; Annette Kalbow; Boris Jacob; Diana Marten; Kathrin Grzeschik; Matti Stöhr (Eds.) (2008) 16th BOBCATSSS Symposium 2008 – Providing Access to Information for Everyone (BOBCATSSS 2008) 28.01.2008 - 30.01.2008 Zadar, Croatia. <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/conferences/bobcatsss2008/>

References

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